DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 323 804 FL 018 862

AUTHOR Butler, Sydney J.
TITLE Lifestorying and Drawing in an EFL Class.
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 23p.; Drawings by students may not reproduce clearly.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Class Activities; Classroom Techniques; Communicative Competence (Languages); Course Descriptions; *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; *Freehand Drawing; *Language Skills; *Personal Narratives; Postsecondary Education; Second Language Instruction; *Self Esteem; Skill Development; Technical Institutes
IDENTIFIERS *Czechoslovakia

ABSTRACT

A classroom activity for developing oral communication in English as a Second Language is described as it was used in a Czechoslovakian postsecondary technical institute. The four intermediate level courses in which the technique was used were based on a communicative model. During the first half of each course, students learned to adapt to more informal teaching styles, with less teacher domination. A highly successful activity involved switching discussion from "public" topics to stories deriving from personal experiences. Each student brought a photograph showing something of personal importance or drew their own "snapshots." The students then listed key vocabulary with which to tell a story about the picture. Because of what the pictures do not or can not show, an information gap is created that leads to efforts for more genuine communication. The incomplete information causes the students to become more motivated to find out about the situation and how it was resolved. Other exercises in lifewriting followed, using specific topics as assignments. Student abilities as artists and storytellers emerged in the classroom, which in turn developed their oral communication skills, self-confidence, and sense of identity. (MSE)

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LIFESTORYING AND DRAWING IN AN EFL CLASS

by

Sydney J. Butler

Dr. Sydney J. Butler is an Assistant Professor in the Language Education Department of the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C., Canada V6T1Z5, where he is involved in teacher education programs and the Lifewriting Project.

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LIFESTORYING AND DRAWING IN AN EFL CLASS

ABSTRACT

This article describes a "lifestorying" activity for developing oral communication in an EFL classroom. The instructor, a volunteer teacher for the Education for Democracy organization in Prague, Czechoslovakia, was teaching four courses at the intermediate level of English for post-secondary students at the Prague Institute of Chemical Technology. The article includes samples of the students' drawings which were used in the class to help the students gain confidence and improve their oral fluency.

ENGLISH IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA

In the spring of 1990 I was very fortunate to be teaching English to four classes of adult students at the Prague Institute of Chemical Technology as a volunteer with the Education for Democracy organization. The students, mainly in their third or fourth years of post-secondary education with a sprinkling of older post-graduate students, were keen to improve their command of oral English. All of them had studied English as a formal, academic course, either during secondary school or at the Institute, but only with native Czech teachers who gave very little emphasis to spoken English. Very few of them had had any experience of

communicating with a native speaker of English. In fact, for most of them their only contact with the oral language was through audiotapes and television programming.

Following the Czech "Velvet Revolution" of November, 1989, the students throughout the country had rejected the compulsory teaching of Russian language (and also Marxist philosophy, history and economic theory). Instead, English was valued, not only as a key to the students' technical and scientific studies, but also as the means by which they would be able to communicate with the rest of western Europe. Indeed, even during those early, exciting months of 1990, when many students became involved in student exchanges with Holland, Sweden, and Spain, it was very clear that English has become the lingua franca for social communication. It has also become the working language for those Czech and Slovak students who are going to France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Israel for working experience as part of their technical education.

L1 METHODOLOGIES FOR L2 LEARNERS

The idea that ESL students might benefit from the same sort of language activities as native English learners is now a familiar one. As a teacher who was brought up on a grammar-translation approach to language learning and later adapted to using an audio-lingual approach, it was of some comfort to me when, after a gap of many years, I found myself back in an EFL classroom. I was now

determined to develop a communicative approach for my classes, and because of the situation, I had to find my own resources, without even the benefit of Mendelsohn's (1986) "The Teacher's Desert Island Survival Kit." Consequently, as my courses progressed I found myself drawing more and more upon my experience of teaching English native speakers, especially in those methods which depend upon drawing on the students' own experiences and memories as in a process approach to teaching writing.

Terry Piper (1981) reminds teachers that "language learning is a process and that there is little reason to expect a learner to develop a new process for each language learner learned." More recently, Michele Chan's (1988) review of what we know about teaching ESL writers shows "how much the composing processes of nonative (sic) speakers of English resemble those of native speakers." Indeed, there are a number of studies which suggest that ESL students can make good use of the same composing strategies as first language learners. Lay (1982) shows how the ESL student can use questioning techniques to expand a topic; Zamel (1983) shows their use of revision strategies; Raimes (1985) suggests that "(ESL) students at any level of proficiency can be engaged in discovery of meaning"; Spack and Sadow (1983) advocate the keeping of journals; Reed and Peyton (1987), Wallace (1987), and Cathro (1987) all advocate the use of dialogue journals; Spack (1984) shows how ESL students use heuristic strategies for invention; Matheidesz (1988) discusses the use of communication

games. Even magical tricks (Friedenberg, 1984) and whole language activities (Rupp, 1986), as well as the more familiar activities of problem-solving, role-playing, and game-playing can have their uses in the ESL class.

ENGLISH AS COMMUNICATION

The English courses which I developed for the Institute were therefore based on a communicative model, by which the students would use their textbook knowledge of English gained through the courses taught by Czech teachers. It was necessary to develop class structures that would ensure that the students had to use English to make themselves understood. In fact, communication was the main criterion for the use of English in the classroom. All questions of grammatical structures, usage, idiomatic expression, and pronunciation were subservient to the overall goal of conveying messages.

Consequently, the course developed through a series of activities which included oral introductions, interviews, panel discussions, debates, newspaper articles and reports, and sample dialogues around a number of themes, with a light-hearted leavening of games and songs. Two important principles evolved. First, I learned that for genuine communication to take place there had to be a "communication gap"--something that the speaker knew, and what

the listeners or questioners wanted to know. Secondly, there had to be time available for a speaker to generate the vocabulary particular to the topic.

COMMUNICATION THROUGH LIFESTORYING

During the first half of the course the students learned to adapt to more informal teaching styles. But more importantly, they came to understand that learning the second language was not simply a matter of learning to pronounce words correctly and getting the grammar right. At first, there had been a lot of expectation that everything spoken had to be correct, and that if an utterance did not conform to the standards of a native speaker, then it was necessary to correct the speaker. Such an attitude also suggests a teacher-dominated classroom in which all of the student's efforts at dialogue are directed towards the teacher whose function is to judge and correct the student's language, with the emphasis on the form of the language rather than the message that was conveyed.

Perhaps the most successful activity in my courses developed when I made a switch from "public" topics to stories deriving from personal experiences. For the first session in this unit, I had asked each student to bring to class a photograph or snapshot which showed something important in their lives. The results were fascinating. There were pictures of the family, pets, holidays,

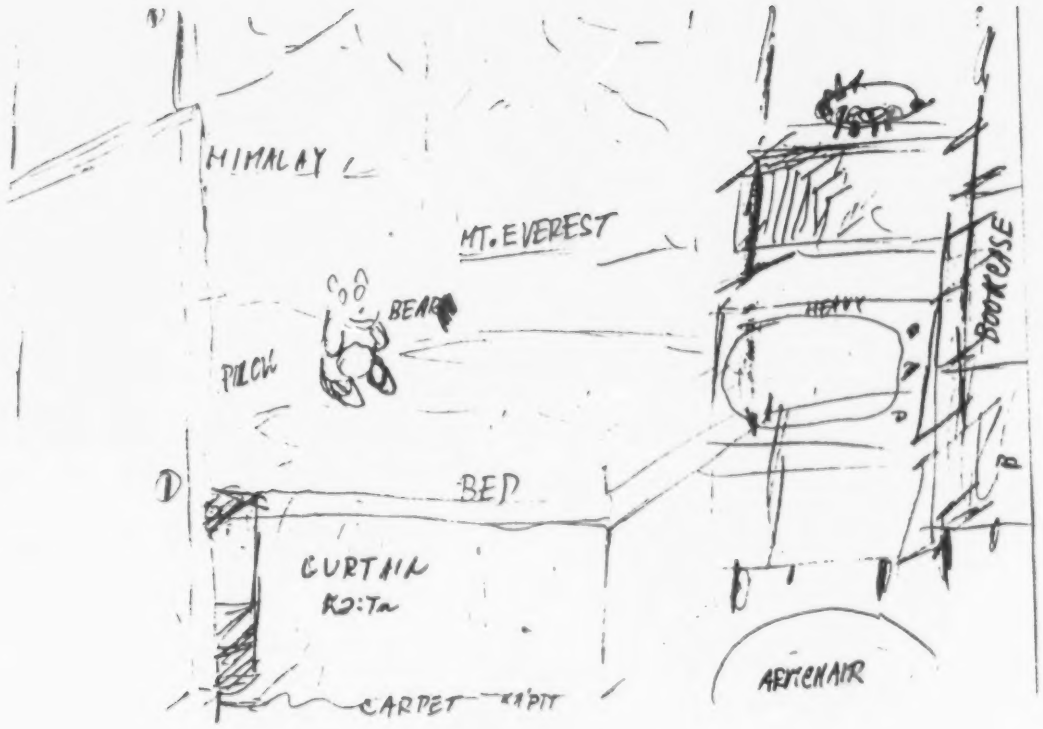

Figure 1 - "Jaroslav"

excursions, and student camping trips, all of which provided ample grist for the communicative mill. However, one difficulty which I had foreseen was that some students were not able to bring a photo.

For these students I had prepared 9 x 12cm pieces of blank paper. I explained the concept of "Do-It-Yourself" and then asked them to draw their own "D-I-Y" snapshot, either the reproduction of an actual photo which they remembered or the snapshot which might have been taken on a particular occasion if a camera had been available. So, quite by accident, I had two conditions of students in the classroom. It was hardly a controlled experiment, but I noticed that the students with the D-I-Y snapshots had a lot more flexibility in their choice of topic than the students with the real photos.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

I allowed all of the students some "rehearsal time" during which they listed some of the key vocabulary which they would need to tell the story behind their picture. It was opportunity for me to circulate among the students and help them with their dictionaries and where necessary give help to individuals with some idiomatic or basic narrative language structures. Then, working in a small group of four or five students, each student had the chance to tell a life story, while the listeners were encouraged to use

Figure 2 - "Jirina"

LIFESTORYING AND DRAWING

"Where, When, Why, Which, Who" questions to extend their understanding.

DRAWING AND VOCABULARY

The bedroom illustrated in Figure 1 was "Jaroslav's" choice for the "Sense of Place" life story, when I had asked the students to choose a place important in their lives. Jaroslav's drawing shows how he generated key vocabulary by labelling the objects in his bedroom. Generally, the students made separate word-lists to cover the topic of their picture. Objects in the pictures, of course, produced words in the noun categories, but I also encouraged them to generate verbs to suit the actions implicit in their stories, and also adjectives, not simply to describe the scene, but also to take them into the deeper significance of the story by expressing the feelings associated with it in their memories.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Many of the students' drawings showed evidence of the accumulative effect of the interaction between drawing, thinking, and the generation of language. For example, "Jirina's" drawing in Figure 2 started as a fairly bare outline of a child and a fence. Then, as she prepared her vocabulary I noticed that she added more details into her picture. Sometimes the drawing would precede the

I have a sister Paula.
She is 9 years younger
than me. When she
was little I had to
look after her.
Once we went
for a walk and
I met my friends and
we began to talk.
Suddenly I turned
and my sister was
gone away. I began to
look for her out loud

Figure 3 - "Marenka"

writing; but then she would also write another word to her vocabulary and then add the appropriate detail to the picture.

The cartoon-like quality of many of the pictures was also an advantage that the drawers had over the students with photographs. They were an inducement to add dialogue during the rehearsal period. "Marenka's" story of her losing her little sister is an example of how the spoken word appears directly in the drawing into the character's speech-bubble in figure 3. Because I was able to notice the grammatical error during the preparation time, it gave me opportunity for a little incidental, individual instruction on the form of the past participle of "steal" which she was then able to put right before her presentation to the group.

[INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

LIFESTORYING FROM THE DRAWINGS

On the other hand, this is not to say that a picture is always worth a thousand words, because it is not often that a whole action can be captured in a single image. To develop their life-stories some of the students decided to depict both a beginning situation and the resolution of the story in a sort of rudimentary cartoon-strip. "Tanya's" drawing in Figure 4 shows her and her younger sister crying because of the message they had just received on the telephone. What is not possible to see in the picture is the total

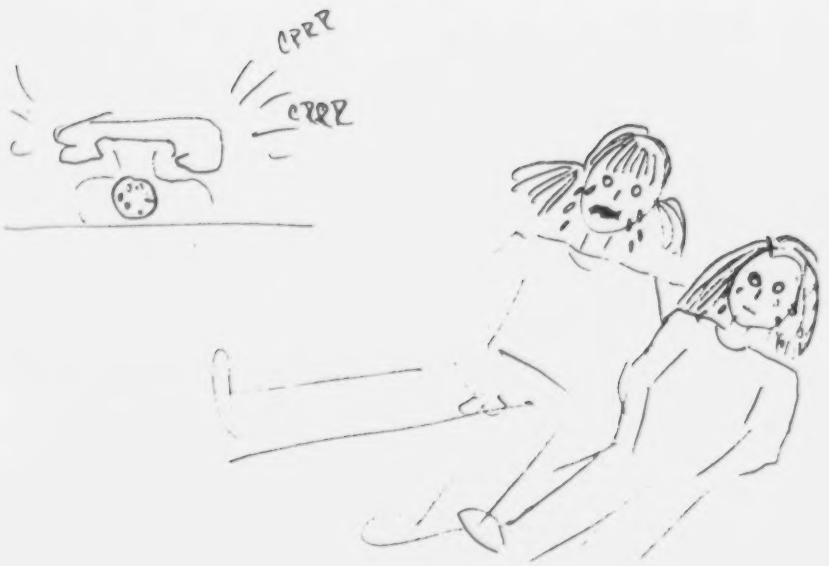

Figure 4 - "Tanya"

shock and absolute despair which the two girls suffered when an anonymous voice told them that their father had just been killed. Nor is it possible to show the girls' isolated situation. They were alone in the family apartment because the mother had gone off to a country cottage with their baby brother and their father had gone to work.

[INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]

This is a good example of how the drawing, because of what it does not show, creates the information gap. In this case it became an excellent motivator for the other students in the group to want to find out more about the situation and how it was resolved. I watched the telling of this story because there was no mistaking Tanya's emotional involvement in the story-telling as she relived the horror of the situation. In spite of the drawback of her limited control of the target language, Tanya's natural skill as a storyteller captivated her audience. The students asked questions to clarify and extend her description of the situation in the drawing, and were in suspense as Tanya went on to explain how the two girls had contacted a neighbour who phoned their father's workplace and had got their father on the line. Because, as it turned out, the initial phone call was a cruel hoax. And she never found out who was the heartless perpetrator.

LIFESTORYING AND DRAWING

LIFESTORYING AND LIFEWRITING

Not all of the stories, of course, were as intense as Tanya's. After the initial life-storying session for which I had asked the students to bring photos, the value of the drawings as an aid to talking became very apparent, and I encouraged all of the students to make drawings as part of their preparation for telling other personal stories. Thus I was able to suggest types of situations for which no snapshot could possibly have been available. Tanya's story derived from the lesson when I had the students think of a "Time of Danger" when they were scared or frightened, or had been in a life or safety threatening situation.

For the rest of this life-storying unit I drew upon my experience with native English-speaking students in public school and adult classes in lifewriting as a means of developing writing skills (see Butler/Bentley, 1988A, 1988B, 1989, 1990). I found that many of the writing experiments which had worked in our lifewriting groups also worked for these Czech students in their oral life-storying. The "Sense of Place" activity provoked a wide range of responses. So, too, the "First Efforts" and "Childhood Incident" triggers enabled the students to draw upon their own personal experiences for their stories. "Favourite People", "Memorable Moments," and "Happiest Times" also produced some interesting stories. Not all of the students were forced to respond to any specific trigger. Rather, there were enough alternatives to give

Figure 5 - "Vasek"

the students some choice in deciding which stories to share with their peers.

[INSERT FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE]

A CASE-HISTORY

"Vasek's" drawing (figure 5) is notable, not only for the quality of the drawing itself, but moreso for the effect which the drawing had on the storyteller. Up to that point in the course, Vasek had been a cheerful, cooperative, but somewhat shy student. While his knowledge of English vocabulary and grammatical structure was adequate and on a par with the rest of the class, his oral performance was considerably lacking. In fact, it was difficult to get him to say anything, and he obviously had difficulty in participating with the other students in the communication activities. For the first month he seemed scarcely to have made any progress.

However, his good humour overcame any possible sense of discouragement, and he kept coming to class regularly. I was listening in on his group when it was his turn to tell his story, expecting that for him to get the words out would be only a little less painful than drawing teeth. But I was wrong. As might be expected, the quality of his drawing captured the other students' attention easily. In addition, he had prepared the words

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"football, striker, goalkeeper, cross, punch, hospital, unconscious." So, the story came out slowly. He was a striker on a college football (soccer) team. He charged the goal to head a high pass or cross from the wing. He jumped to head the ball. At the same time the goalkeeper jumped to punch the ball away. But the goalkeeper's punch caught him under the jaw, and he fell down unconscious. It was a K.O. When he came to, he was in hospital with all his team-mates around him. The coach told him that his header had scored the winning goal.

It was a delightful story which the other students enjoyed, but the main effect could be seen on Vasek's face. He was beaming with the success of actually having communicated a real experience to his listeners in English, and they had understood his story in spite of his somewhat fragmented language. On subsequent occasions Vasek had opportunity to repeat his story to other groups, and it was noticeable how his language performance improved in fluency and expression with his growing confidence, a progress which carried over to the other communiction activities which followed this unit.

CONCLUSION

The value of this life-storying unit for the Czech students goes beyond the mere production of language. With older, native speakers of English I have found that life-storying and lifewriting are powerful tools for the development of the life-review process

(Butler, 1985). But the benefit in my Czech classroom was probably more dramatic. With their life-stories the students were able to re-create in English the very common day-to-day experience of telling someone about something that was uniquely theirs. The activity provided them with opportunity and motivation to extend their communicative power in the target language. But just as important, in the classroom the activity contributed to each student's sense of personal identity. And certainly, as their instructor, I felt that after hearing their stories I knew each one on a more personal level. I also learned through their stories a lot about Czech culture and the lifestyle of Czech students. Perhaps, most of all, this activity illustrates the value of having a real audience for the students' language, just as Crookall (1986) found for his EFL students' short stories, and also as Appel (1989) found when drawing upon the students' personal experiences and self-reflection.

I was especially fortunate in being able to get the students to use their abilities in drawing, not as a mere illustration, but rather as a heuristic technique which enabled them to develop their ideas about their life stories. Their drawings provided a focus of attention during their storytelling episodes with their peers, and also provided a very important rehearsal time, when they could expand on their topics and collect the essential vocabulary. The result was that every one of the students was able to achieve

considerable satisfaction in the achievement of being able to communicate a short piece of personal experience.

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